4.18 WILD HORSES

Impacts from decisions concerning paleontological resources, soils and watershed, special status species, visual resource management, and woodland and forests would have negligible or minor impacts on wild horses in the VPA; therefore, they will not be discussed further in this analysis. Impacts from decisions concerning cultural resources, fire management, forage allocation, lands and realty management, livestock grazing, mineral resources, recreation, riparian resources, special designations, travel, vegetation resources, wild horse management, and wildlife and fisheries management would potentially impact wild horses in the VPA. Decisions relating to these resources and resource uses would have short-term or long-term, direct or indirect impact on wild horses in the VPA.

There are currently one herd area (HA) and two herd management areas (HMAs) in the VPA: the Bonanza HMA, Winter Ridge HA, and Hill Creek HMA. The proposed alternatives vary in their impacts on maintaining the wild horse herds in these areas, as summarized in Table 4.18.1.

TABLE 4.18.1. MAINTAINING WILD HORSE HERDS, BY ALTERNATIVE

	Bonanza HMA	Winter Ridge HA	Hill Creek HMA
Alternative A	No	Yes	Yes
Alternative B	No	No	No
Alternative C	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alternative D – No Action	Yes	No	Yes

There are no known reports of wild burros existing within the VPA; therefore, no further analysis or discussion of wild burros will be made in this section.

4.18.1 Impacts Common to All Alternatives

4.18.1.1 Wild Horses

Wild horses would be protected from unauthorized capture, branding, harassment, or death in established Herd Management Areas (HMAs). In those HMAs where wild horses would be maintained, the HMAs would be managed to sustain established wild horse populations and to achieve and maintain a desired plant community that would provide palatable, nutritious forage for wild horses while sustaining rangeland health and a thriving natural ecological balance. These herds would be maintained by:

- reducing reproductive rates and regularly scheduling gathers (as outlined in Herd Management Plans) so as to maintain appropriate management levels (AMLs),
- maintaining optimal male to female ratios within the herds,
- establishing a more "normal distribution" through selective removal,
- maintaining herd characteristics and genetic diversity by periodically introducing new individuals, and
- coordinating testing protocols with the State of Utah Veterinarian to help maintain healthy wild horse populations free of equine diseases.

4.18.1.2 Fire

Fire management other than prescribed burning, which includes mechanical and chemical treatment methods, would impact wild horses under all of the alternatives. Mechanical and/or chemical treatments and seeding treatments would have direct and indirect, adverse, short-term effects on wild horse herds. Direct impacts would be caused by the removal of forage within the fire treatment areas. Indirect impacts would be produced by fencing the treated areas during vegetation re-growth.

4.18.1.3 Lands and Realty

For lands and realty management actions under all of the alternatives, there is the potential that land tenure adjustments (i.e., acquisitions, disposals, and withdrawals) would adversely impact wild horse herds associated with areas where adjustments might be made. The land tenure adjustment process would analyze impacts to wild horses on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, land use designations and road improvements would increase access into and recreation/tourism in wild horse HAs and HMAs. This would, in turn, adversely increase wild horse harassment, which could disrupt the daily and seasonal activities of the wild horse bands in these areas. Repeated and consistent disruption of the herds would have a long-term, adverse impact on wild horses.

4.18.1.4 Riparian

Riparian management actions would impact wild horses under all of the alternatives by reducing or eliminating their access to riparian areas during efforts to improve riparian resources. Any actions that would have the potential to impact wild horses in the VPA would be further analyzed on a case-by-case basis prior to the implementation of a project, but restricting wild horse access to water within riparian areas would have direct, adverse impacts on wild horses.

4.18.1.5 Wildlife

Wildlife management actions under all of the alternatives would adversely impact wild horses. Wildlife has the potential to compete directly and indirectly with wild horses for forage and habitat. However, efforts have been made in all of the alternatives to adequately allocate forage and habitat to wildlife and wild horses, with the goal of reducing interspecies competition.

4.18.2 Alternative Impacts

4.18.2.1 Impacts of Cultural Decisions, Recreation Decisions, Special Designations, and Travel Decisions on Wild Horses

4.18.2.1.1 Alternatives A and C

The protection of cultural resource areas in the VPA described under Alternatives A and C would have an indirect, long-term, beneficial effect on wild horses due to the restriction on uses in these areas. These alternatives would limit OHV travel in Upper Willow Creek (Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA) to designated routes to protect cultural resources in these areas. Alternative C would also close these areas to oil and gas leasing, which would indirectly preserve habitat for wild horses in portions of the Winter Ridge HA and the Hill Creek HMA. Compared to Alternative D, Alternatives A and C would provide a higher degree of protection to wild horses by restricting some activities around designated cultural sites.

Alternative C would close Wolf Point to oil and gas leasing, thereby reducing the impacts of oil and gas development on the neighboring HAs.

4.18.2.1.2 Alternative B

No wild horses would be maintained within the VPA under this alternative. There would be no impacts to the resource from cultural, recreation, special designations, and travel decisions.

4.18.2.1.3 Alternative D – No Action

Alternative D does not specify designating Seep Ridge, Book Cliff Divide, and Atchee Ridge Roads as BLM Back Country Byways and allows for continued recreational use of the White River with minimal management oversight and unlimited and unconfined recreation in the Book Cliffs. Alternative D would perpetuate current levels of adverse indirect, long-term impacts on wild horses in the HA and HMAs.

4.18.2.2 Impacts of Fire Decisions on Wild Horses

4.18.2.2.1 Alternatives A and C

Fire management for Alternatives A and C would allow for prescribed fire on approximately 156,425 acres per decade. Short-term, adverse impacts on wild horses, in the form of reduced forage and restricted use of these areas by wild horses, would occur in areas subject to prescribed burns. However, these prescribed fires would be planned in areas where long-term benefits (including improved forage) would be realized as a result of the vegetation treatment.

4.18.2.2.2 Alternative B

There would be no impacts from fire decisions on wild horses, as all herds would be removed from the VPA.

4.18.2.2.3 Alternative D – No Action

Fire management under Alternative D would allow for prescribed fire on approximately 27,950 acres in the Book Cliffs area. Short-term, adverse impacts on wild horses, in the form of reduced forage and restricted use of these areas by wild horses, would occur in areas subject to such treatments. However, these prescribed fires would be planned in areas where long-term benefits would be realized as a result of the vegetation treatment.

Compared to the other alternatives, Alternative D would provide the most protection to wild horses in the short term by potentially disturbing fewer acres of forage through fire treatments.

4.18.2.3 Impacts of Forage Allocation Decisions on Wild Horses

4.18.2.3.1 Alternative A

Forage allocation proposals under Alternative A would have several direct, long-term impacts on wild horses in the VPA. Wild horses could realize a substantial long-term direct benefit (i.e., improved forage conditions) from the proposal to change the season of use by livestock grazing to improve rangeland health, which would increase long-term forage. Alternative A would limit the foraging of uplands to 50 percent of existing forage unless otherwise specified by a management plan. Forage allocations within the VPA to wild horses would total 2,940 AUMs. Compared to Alternative D – No Action, the wild horse allocation of Alternative A would be less beneficial than the No Action Alternative.

Alternative A includes a management stipulation: if monitoring indicates that a reduction in forage use is necessary for the Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA because of demonstrated conflicts between wildlife, livestock, and wild horses, the reductions would be divided proportionally between wildlife, livestock, and wild horses. Additional forage identified in the Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA would be divided proportionately between livestock, big game, and wild horses.

4.18.2.3.2 Alternative B

Under Alternative B, all wild horses would be removed from the VPA; therefore, no forage (0 AUMs) would be allocated to wild horses.

4.18.2.3.3 Alternative C

Similar to Alternative A, C would limit the foraging of uplands to 50 percent of existing forage unless otherwise specified by a management plan. Forage allocations to wild horses in the Winter Ridge HA would be 1,200 AUMs, and forage allocations to wild horses in the Hill Creek HMA would be 1,740 AUMs. Forage allocations to wild horses in the Bonanza HMA would be 1,020 AUMs. Total wild horse forage allocations would be 3,960 AUMs under this alternative and would have greater beneficial impacts on wild horse herds when compared to Alternative D which would allocate 3,360 AUMs for wild horses.

Alternative A includes a management stipulation, which would go into effect if monitoring indicates that a reduction in forage use is necessary in the Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA because of demonstrated conflicts between wildlife, livestock, and wild horses. Under Alternative C, reductions in forage would be made only to livestock. Similar to Alternative A, for Alternative C, additional forage identified in the Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA would be divided proportionately between big game, and wild horses. If wild horses or big game did not need additional forage, it would be assigned to livestock.

Under Alternative C, big game and wild horse numbers would be allowed to increase only to the point where livestock permitted use would not be reduced.

Alternative C also outlines that if forage conflicts between livestock and wild horses are identified in the Bonanza HMA, use by livestock and wild horses would be reduced, but the wild horse herd would not be reduced below 40 animals. If forage conflicts are identified between wildlife and wild horses in the Bonanza HMA, use by wildlife and wild horses would be reduced proportionally. If additional forage were available in the Bonanza HMA, wild horse use would be increased in accordance with available forage.

4.18.2.3.4 Alternative D – No Action

The maximum use of forage on uplands would remain unspecified under Alternative D.

There would be no AUM allocation for a wild horse herd in the Winter Ridge HA under Alternative D because all wild horses would be removed. Forage allocations to wild horses in the Hill Creek HMA would be 2,340 AUMs under this alternative. Forage allocations to wild horses in the Bonanza HMA would be 1,020 AUMs. Forage conflicts and additional forage allocations would remain unspecified in the Book Cliffs Locality (Hill Creek HMA and Winter Ridge HA) under Alternative D. The total AUMs allocated to wild horses under Alternative D would be 3,360.

In summary, Alternative B would provide the least protection to wild horses, as they would be completely removed from the VPA. In the Winter Ridge HA, Alternatives A and C would be most beneficial. Under Alternatives B and D there would be no wild horses.

In the Hill Creek HMA, Alternative D would allocate the most AUMs, followed by Alternative A and C. Alternative B would not allocate any AUMs for wild horses, and the wild horse herd would be removed. In the Bonanza HMA, Alternative C and D would provide the most benefit by allocating the most AUMs for wild horses. Alternatives A and B would not allocate any AUMs for wild horses, and all of the wild horses would be removed.

4.18.2.4 Impacts of Minerals Development on Wild Horses

4.18.2.4.1 Alternative A

Minerals development would have long-term, direct and indirect, adverse impacts to wild horses. Direct impacts would reduce the AUMs available to wild horses. Indirect impacts would include the general effects of widespread activities that would create noise, and associated disturbance to horses.

Under Alternative A (when compared to Alternative D–No Action Alternative), additional acres in the Winter Ridge HA and Hill Creek HMA would go into categories that either restrict minerals development or result in less of an impact on wild horse habitat. This would have beneficial, long-term, direct and indirect impacts on wild horse populations in these areas.

4.18.2.4.2 Alternative B

Under Alternative B, all wild horses would be removed from the VPA; therefore, there would be no impacts to wild horse populations from minerals development.

4.18.2.4.3 Alternative C

The long-term adverse impacts of mineral resource development would be similar to those described under Alternative A.

Under Alternative C (when compared to Alternative D–No Action) additional acres in the HMAs and HA would go into categories that either restrict minerals development or result in less of an impact on wild horse habitat. This shift in oil and gas development designations would have direct and indirect, long-term, beneficial impacts to all three of the wild horse herds in the VPA. In comparison, Alternative D would maintain current minerals development designation on lands in the HMAs and HA.

4.18.2.4.4 Alternative D

Under this alternative, the impacts from minerals development would be similar to those described under Alternative A except for the long-term adverse impacts to wild horses, which would maintain current minerals development designation on lands in the HMAs and HA.

Alternative C would provide the highest degree of resource protection from minerals development by restricting minerals development in the HMAs and HA, followed by Alternative A. Alternative D would provide a lower degree of protection than Alternatives A and C. Alternative B would provide no protection, as wild horses would be removed from the VPA.

4.18.2.5 Impacts of Rangeland Improvements on Wild Horses

Wild horses would directly benefit in the long-term from rangeland improvements in areas associated with the wild horse HAs. These rangeland improvements would include: 1) conducting vegetation treatments aimed at improving forage composition; 2) constructing guzzlers or other reservoirs; 3) constructing wells or improving springs; and 4) installing additional water pipelines. Rangeland improvements for each alternative are shown in Table 4.18.2.

4.18.2.5.1 Alternative A

Vegetation treatments for rangeland improvements under Alternative A would occur on 5,750 fewer acres and 23 fewer wells/springs than Alternative D. Overall, Alternative A would have beneficial long-term rangeland improvement impacts on wild horses similar to Alternative D, as Alternative A would increase the number of guzzlers/reservoirs and water pipeline miles over those proposed under Alternative D.

TABLE 4.18.2. RANGELAND IMPROVEMENTS PROPOSED UNDER EACH ALTERNATIVE

	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
Vegetation Treatment (acres)	34,640	50,900	45,860	40,390
Fencing (miles)	68.5	368.5	129.0	65.0
Guzzlers/reservoirs	812	1,165	811	775
Wells/springs	51	78	87	74
Water pipeline (miles)	37.5	51.0	29.5	35.0

4.18.2.5.2 Alternative B

Under Alternative B, all wild horses would be removed from the VPA; therefore, there would be no impacts to wild horse populations from rangeland improvements.

4.18.2.5.3 Alternative C

Vegetation treatments for rangeland improvements under Alternative C would occur on 45,860 acres (5,470 more acres than Alternative D), with more rangeland improvements in all categories except for water pipeline miles, when compared to Alternative D – No Action. Alternative C would have more beneficial long-term impacts on wild horses than Alternative D.

4.18.2.5.4 Alternative D – No Action

This alternative would continue the rangeland improvement currently scheduled to be completed in the areas associated with the wild horse HA and HMAs.

Alternative C would provide the greatest degree of wild horse protection via range improvements, when compared to the other alternatives. Alternatives A and D would provide protection to the resource, but less than C. Alternative B would not protect wild horses, as they would be removed from the VPA.

4.18.2.6 Effects of Wild Horse Decisions on Wild Horses

4.18.2.6.1 Alternative A

Alternative A would not reintroduce a wild horse herd into the Bonanza HMA. It would not allow for the construction of gap fences or additional water development for wild horses in the Bonanza HMA. Fifteen reservoirs in close proximity to the HA boundary would not need to be fenced.

This alternative would have a long-term, direct, beneficial impact to the wild horse herd in the Winter Ridge HA. Under this alternative, the Winter Ridge HA would be designated as an HMA, with an AML of 100 horses. This herd would not be reduced below 50 individuals. Adjustments in the AML would be in accordance with criteria outlined under Forage management decisions. A gathering plan would be prepared and an estimated Based on estimated 50 horses would be removed every four years. These horses would be made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program.

This alternative would have a long-term, direct, beneficial impact to the wild horse herd in the Hill Creek HMA. Under this alternative, Hill Creek would continue to be managed as an HMA. An AML of 70–145 horses, with a minimum herd of 70 individuals and a target herd size of approximately 100 individuals would be established. No horse grazing permits would be issued in or immediately surrounding the Hill Creek HMA. The BLM would enter into a Nation-to-Nation agreement with the Northern Ute Tribe and issue a Memorandum of Understanding with adjacent private property owners for range improvements (e.g., fences for key areas of management concern and for wild horse/Tribal horse management). A gathering plan would be prepared and gathers regularly scheduled, and approximately 75 horses would be removed and made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program every four years. The boundaries of the HMA would be extended to include the north end of Wild Horse Bench (approximately 30,347 acres) and Big Pack Mountain (approximately 22,865 acres). A Wild Horse Herd Management Area Plan would be written after the ROD is signed. Under this alternative, equine diseases would continue to be a problem, impacting both the Northern Ute Tribe horses as well as wild horses because of the potential for contact between herds. The continuing equine disease problem would have long-term adverse impacts on wild horse populations.

4.18.2.6.2 Alternative B

Alternative B would remove all wild horses from the VPA. It would not allow for the construction of gap fences or additional water development for wild horses. Fifteen reservoirs in close proximity to the Bonanza HMA boundary would not need to be fenced.

This alternative would remove all wild horses from the Hill Creek HMA after a management agreement is reached with the Ute Indian Tribe for the existing herd. Equine diseases would not be an issue with wild horses, as they would be removed from the VPA. Likewise, all wild horses would be removed from the Winter Ridge HA.

4.18.2.6.3 Alternative C

Alternative C would re-establish a herd of wild horses in the Bonanza HMA. It would establish an AML of 85 wild horses, with a minimum herd of 40 individuals. A separate management plan would be prepared to specify the needs of the wild horse herd in the Bonanza HMA, and a gathering plan would be prepared and approximately 45 horses would be removed every four

years. These horses would be made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program.

This alternative would designate the Winter Ridge HA as a HMA and would establish an AML of 100 horses, not be reduced below 50 individuals. Adjustments in the AML would be in accordance with criteria as described under Forage management decisions. A gathering plan would be prepared and approximately 50 horses would be removed every four years. These horses would be made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program.

This alternative would manage Hill Creek as a HMA. The AML for the Hill Creek herd would be set at 145 horses, with a minimum herd of 70 individuals. A management agreement would be reached with the Ute Indian Tribe for the existing herd. A gathering plan would be prepared and approximately 75 horses would be removed every four years. These horses would be made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program. This alternative would extend the boundaries of the Hill Creek HMA to include the north end of Wild Horse Bench (approximately 30,347 acres) and Big Pack Mountain (approximately 22,865 acres). Under this alternative, equine diseases would continue to be a problem, with long-term adverse impacts on both the Northern Ute Tribe horses as well as wild horses because of the potential for contact between herds.

4.18.2.6.4 Alternative D–No Action Alternative

Alternative D would implement the Book Cliffs RMP amendment involving the Bonanza HMA. This amendment would re-establish a herd of 40 wild horses, allowing for a maximum herd size of 85 individuals of mixed breed horses, including Appaloosa and Spanish mustang bloodlines. The Bonanza HA would be managed as a HMA. A gathering plan would be prepared and approximately 45 horses would be removed every four years. These horses would be made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program.

Alternative D would allow for the construction of three miles of gap fences where cliffs on the north rim of the White River would not provide natural barriers. Cattle guards would be installed on roads where needed to ensure integrity of the fences. Twenty-five additional water developments, consisting of a combination of reservoirs, shallow wells, and guzzlers, would be installed for wild horses in the Bonanza HMA. Up to 15 reservoirs outside of, but in close proximity to the HA boundaries would be fenced.

The Hill Creek HMA would be managed with an AML of 195 horses. Minimum herd size, a management agreement with the Ute Indian Tribe, and a gathering and management plan would remain unspecified. The Hill Creek HMA boundaries would remain as specified in 1971.

This alternative would have a long-term, direct, adverse impact to the wild horse herd in the Winter Ridge HA. The wild horse herd in the Winter Ridge HA would be gathered and made available for adoption under BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program.

Of all the alternatives, Alternative C would provide the most protection to wild horse herds in the VPA by re-establishing wild horses in the Bonanza HMA, maintaining the Winter Ridge herd, and extending the boundaries of the Hill Creek HMA. Alternative A would provide a high degree of protection, but less than Alternative C. Alternative D would provide less protection than Alternatives A or C. Alternative B would provide the least protection to wild horse herds, as they would be removed from the VPA.

4.18.2.7 Summary

4.18.2.7.1 Alternative A

Alternative A would provide a high degree of wild horse protection (though less than Alternative C) by providing some protection from fire treatments, range improvements, extending management boundaries, and designating the Winter Ridge HA as a HMA.

4.18.2.7.2 Alternative B

Under Alternative B, wild horses would be removed from the VPA. This alternative would provide no protection to wild horse herds.

4.18.2.7.3 Alternative C

This alternative would provide the highest degree of wild horse protection by re-establishing the Bonanza HMA, designating the Winter Ridge HA as a HMA, extending herd management boundaries, designating travel corridors, and providing the most range improvements.

4.18.2.7.4 Alternative D–No Action Alternative

Alternative D would provide some protection to wild horses, but less than Alternatives A and C. This alternative would cause potentially less short-term disturbance to forage from fire treatment than the other alternatives and allocate more AUMs in the Hill Creek HMA than the other alternatives.

4.18.3 Mitigation Measures

- Consider fencing major arterial roadways and major roads in the vicinity of oil and gas development areas to reduce the potential for vehicle-wild horse collisions.
- Use a staggered schedule for fire treatment within HMAs to reduce the short-term, adverse impacts to wild horses from treated areas that have been fenced off for vegetation regrowth.
- Coordinate equine disease testing with the State of Utah Veterinarian to ensure that wild horse herds remain healthy and do not impact Ute Tribe horses.
- Encourage Uintah County and the Ute Tribe to establish an equine disease-testing program.

4.18.4 Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

There are no unavoidable adverse impacts to wild horses if mitigation measures are implemented.

4.18.5 Short-term Use Versus Long-term Productivity

The short-term resource uses associated with minerals development (such as seismic exploration and natural gas test well drilling, and the noise associated with these activities) in an area would have adverse impacts on the long-term productivity of wild horse herds if they impinge on wild horse foraging areas and water sources. These activities, though short term, would have cumulatively long-term adverse impacts on wild horse productivity if they continue sporadically throughout an area.

Short-term fire management activities, such as prescribed burning or other fire treatments would have beneficial impacts on the long-term productivity of the herds by increasing available forage.

Dispersed recreational activities in an area, while individually short-term, would potentially have cumulative long-term impacts on wild horse herd productivity by preventing an area's use for shelter, forage, or as a water source.

4.18.6 Irreversible and Irretrievable Impacts

Irretrievable impacts to the VPA wild horse herds would include the loss of forage in areas of minerals development. The construction and maintenance of access roads, drilling wellpads, and support facilities would temporarily remove areas from vegetation production that would otherwise be available for wild horse forage or as shelter. Gap fencing to protect riparian areas would be an irretrievable loss of water resources for wild horses and would have an adverse impact on wild horses. Under Alternative B, the complete removal of wild horses from the VPA would be an irretrievable loss of the wild horse resource. There are no irreversible impacts to the wild horse resource.